**Stuart Hadow Short Story Competition 2019**

**Judge’s Report**

My congratulations to all entrants on your achievement.

My congratulations and my admiration. The Australian writing community must be a healthy one, thanks partly to the support of writing centres like FAWWA and competitions like the Stuart Hadow. Healthy, despite the often low support from the community at large. And healthy because, in these difficult economic times, creative people clearly don’t give up. We had 91 entrants in this competition. And that looks like a very healthy number to me.

But it isn’t just the number. It’s the calibre of nearly all the submissions. Out of that ‘nearly all’ I have identified 38 (almost half the total) that were of the highest quality — and by that I mean publishable, or very close to publishable (given a few tweaks). Of those, I found 20 to be outstanding. Then it came down to 9, or the commended, the highly commended and the three winners. Sorting out which those 9 were proved to be one of the hardest tasks I’ve ever performed. But even when I was most frustrated by the struggle and dilemmas of decision-making, I felt the balancing power of joy, delight and enrichment in the reading. And that is why I am full of admiration and could not feel more honoured or privileged to have been given this task.

But what do I bring to this role of ‘judge’? (I find it a heavy word.) What was I judging by?

To start with, I simply chose the stories that best pleased and delighted me.

Then I thought about what makes a short story. What generic traits was I looking for? The features that impressed me most in the stories I read were: compactness, nuance, tension of some kind, often a surprise or twist in the turn of events or in the ending, sometimes a hint of irony, and always something that clinched the whole in a satisfying conclusion, even when it was dark or open-ended. The writers who did well displayed a full understanding of what the short story is and how it works, and a thorough acquaintance with its distinctive features and conventions.

And, finally, I enjoyed the good writing, that is: expressive language, a distinctive style or voice, and clever use of vocabulary and sentence structure. And I was impressed by stories that displayed a clear knowledge of grammar, syntax and punctuation along with an ability to implement and manipulate them for a desired effect.

A good story (it became clearer than ever to me after reading so many together) can be about almost anything. I found a wonderful diversity of content in these stories, but also some groupings around common ideas — whether universal (like gender, coming of age, marriage or relationships), or reflective of our times (like current issues of cross-cultural interaction, the environment and disability). I was struck by the number of stories that focused on the effects of socio-economic pressures and prejudices. Even when set in other eras like the Great Depression, they resonated with the struggles of our own period of economic downturn. Another commonality (and the one with the largest grouping) was children; some of the best stories were about children’s ways of coping with their world.

As you know, it’s not the content that counts most, but the way the content is treated. This brings me to the question, what went wrong with some stories?

In any story, something has to happen. This is a narrative, after all. While there may be some exceptions, it usually can’t be all description or images (a prose poem?) or all dialogue (theatre? a screenplay?). The main event doesn’t need to be dramatic or full of action — it can be something like a decision, but one with consequences. Among the stories I read, a few had too much going on and felt crowded with incidents and coincidences that became hard to believe or seemed to have no purpose; there was no real sense of a central idea or point to the story. At other times the point was overstated, the tone being academic, expository or didactic (for which we have the essay or the sermon). There were also cases of too much development or elaboration (more like a chapter in a novel). This genre is not for expanding. It can stretch the mind, but only in proportion to its tightness. A chronological recount will never work. The distilled quality essential to the short story becomes lost.

Except in the few cases where errors were numerous, I decided not to count formatting or even spelling and punctuation, not when all else was working. Weak structure, however, including inappropriate paragraphing and other ways of separating different scenes or moments, did sometimes spoil a story, especially where several short separate scenes appeared in succession, often with their own headings. Not a short story! I did find, surprisingly, language and structure errors in even some of the best stories, and I recommend a very close scrutiny of this aspect of a manuscript before it is sent out for competitions or in the hope of publication.

Titles aren’t everything, but they do matter. To me at least, some of them did not feel right, being either too obvious or too obscure, or just flat. The same goes for endings. They have to hit the right note.

A part of the difficulty of my task came from what I call a sub-genre of the short story: the traditional Aussie yarn with its self-deprecating humour or whiffs thereof. I include the bush yarn here too. It felt a bit like comparing apples and oranges when I held up a comical piece, never meant to be anything but light, whimsical and entertaining, alongside one that tries for depth and gravity. Why should I penalise it for being what it was meant to be? For various reasons, not all of these made it into the long list, but a couple of them did. And even the stories that didn’t were enjoyable to read, and I thank you for a good laugh.

Another difficulty for me was how to regard the more experimental submissions. If I’m looking for the essential traits of the short story (as listed above), why would I accept anything contaminated by other forms and generic influences? As I see it, the letter, for instance, can serve as an external framework, as long as some major aspects of the short story genre still hold sway within that framework. The same goes for speculative fiction, whether taken from fantasy or science and technology. And even obscurity and erudition are fine where I can see a reason for them and where they do not become confusing for the reader. Having named some traits and conventions of the genre, I can say that I’m open to experimentation with these, and even their subversion, but at some point in the story I have to understand why.

When it came down to the short list of stories, all of which I found excellent and wished I could give a substantial award to (i.e. a remunerative one, because that’s what those of us in the arts all need now more than ever), I found I had to consider the smallest differences. Where were the nuances? How was the ending managed? How did the language build towards that conclusion? And even how much did something like a misplaced comma interfere with readability?

Then there’s that old elephant in the room: the judge’s subjectivity. Our personal likes and dislikes always enter into our choices. All I can do, the best any judge can do, is acknowledge that and hope the recognition has brought me a little closer to the impartiality I know I can never attain.

I’d now like to name all 38 stories that I feel are deserving of acknowledgement. I list them here in alphabetical order.

A Man and his Akubra

A Slow Sunday

A Splash of Colour

Amber the Dog

Between Two Eternities

Big Mother

Boat People

Damaged Sole

Earl on the Weekend

Girl on a Skateboard

Going

He Turned Up

How I’ll Know Her

Letter from the Last Duchess

Lost

Mariko’s Mouse

Mr Agoo

Once She Wore

One Good Summer

Pangs of Conscience

Questions of Trust

Ray

Retribution

Rip

Spinning

The Body

The Bush

The Cave

The Keeper

The Odd Number

The Storm

The White Horse

Thieves of Boys

Tom’s Understanding

Treehouse

Unmasking Old Father Time

Words from Beyond

Wrong Side of the Tracks

Of these I picked out, after much tearing of my hair, the following 20 for my short list:

Amber the Dog

Between Two Eternities

Boat People

Earl on the Weekend

He Turned Up

How I’ll Know Her

Letter from the Last Duchess

Mariko’s Mouse

Ray

Retribution

Spinning

The Body

The Cave

The Odd Number

The Storm

The White Horse

Thieves of Boys

Unmasking Old Father Time

Words from Beyond

Wrong Side of the Tracks

There were two more I’d like to mention that almost made it into the 20:

A Slow Sunday

A Splash of Colour

Then came the hardest part: to narrow the number down to the Commended, the Highly Commended and the winners.

**Commended**

Amber the Dog – The line between routine and risk, staidness and adventure, just won’t be crossed in this sweet but essentially sad tale.

Letter from the Last Duchess – Using the framework of a letter and relying for its effect on the reader’s acquaintance with a famous poem, this text nonetheless bears the hallmarks of a good short story through the information passed secretly from one woman to another and its movement towards the gentle surprise ending.

The Odd Number – Music holds it all together, and while the end is dramatic, the middle is what provides a special poignancy and meaning to the whole.

**Highly Commended**

Between Two Eternities – Relates erotic arousal to space and time in a most unusual and evocative way; delightful in its quirkiness, sensuality and kindness to religion.

The White Horse – The bush yarn and the ghost story combine to give us a tight and well-told Australian classic.

Wrong Side of the Tracks – Social prejudice proves less than skin deep by the end of this story where humour and well placed insertions of back story and other scenes help bring the situation to its ironic and heart-warming resolution.

**Winners**

**3rd Place** – Boat People

A clever and subtle combination of a number of ideas and issues. What could family violence, refugees and creating a good poem have to do with each other? The connection is hinted at without being spelled out. We come to experience it for ourselves, to feel the intertwining of lives, partly through the close third-person narration. The main character starts out as a mere observer of an incident (from her car as she drives along a country road) before she is drawn to participate. The experience is joined by thoughts of her original destination and memories from her past. The ending, which could have been a little flat in les practised hands, gives just the right final flourish with its adroit reference to an object mentioned earlier in the story.

**2nd place** – How I’ll Know Her

An example of a story where a little experimentation with the form and the language is perfectly adapted to the subject matter. This could not have been easy, but is brilliantly executed, with just the right balance and to-and-fro movement between the head space of its first-person narrator and the immediacy of dialogue. Especially to be commended is the way we are drip-fed information concerning the character’s situation and relationships and who else the story is also really about. The whole builds relentlessly towards the dramatic effect of the final discovery, as new to the main character as it is to us. Devastating. And what a title!

**1st place** – Mariko’s Mouse

A gentle story full of delicacy and sensibility. Nuance and complexity are woven like filigree into the simple language that makes the telling look so easy. This deceptive simplicity in the vocabulary choice and sentence construction is in keeping with the point of view of the child who, from a country where smallness has value, has moved with her parents to Australia. The story is astonishingly compact, with every detail carrying a wealth of meaning. Diverse everyday scenes of her negotiating life in Perth flow into each other seamlessly, the transitions as smooth as silk. The theme of cultural interaction and integration merges gradually with an unexpected, but related, parent-child quandary. Quiet tension builds to an incident that brings on the beautiful conclusion, clinched with the help of a reference to a small moment earlier in the story. In some ways, this is an exquisite miniature tableau, but it’s one that adheres fully to the conventions of the short story.

In giving these awards I feel humbled as well as admiring, like an amateur among professionals. After all, *you* are the true practitioners. And everything about most of the stories, even those not in the short list of 20, shouts out: Whatever you do, don’t give up. Keep writing. You’re travelling well.

Michele Drouart

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